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ENGLISH FOR RESEARCH PAPER WRITING. SOME PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF TEACHING WRITING TO DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Introduction

English for Research Paper Writing is an elective course for doctoral students at the Jagiellonian University organized by the university's language centre (Jagiellońskie Centrum Językowe UJ) and designed as a 60-hour course, primarily focused on writing research papers.[1]

Student profile

The students participating in this year's course are mostly first- or second-year doctoral students at the Jagiellonian University. The course was designed to meet their needs in writing up their research in the form of conference papers and research articles and has been taught for the past year. Below is a short profile of those students who have chosen to sign up for the course this year:

- Previous participation in writing courses (in both L1 and L2)
- Regular readers of research papers
- Some experience of writing research papers
- Close familiarity with their field of study
- Highly developed critical thinking skills
- Language level range: from B2+ to C2

As the teacher responsible for this course, I would emphasize that all the above characteristics can be harnessed for the benefit of teaching the course. Of particular importance are students' analytical skills and their experience of reading

[1] In fact, this course has been developed on the basis of two courses, previously taught by the author during the years 2009–2010, both of which aimed at developing general writing skills of their participants, but were not focused on any specific types of texts.

research papers, precisely because many tasks involve text analysis. Students are also required to search for model texts *themselves* (these are mainly excerpts from research papers concerning their specific fields of study), exemplifying the language functions or text pattern currently being focused on, which makes it even more relevant to their individual needs and expectations.

Particularly interesting is the fact that the students represent such a variety of disciplines (in other words, the course really involves "teaching across the curriculum"). This year, for example, my class contains students of chemistry, physics, philosophy, medicine, biology, psychology, to name but a few. However, this seems to be a benefit rather than a drawback. Firstly, it makes for very interesting discussions, drawing comparisons of conventions and practices of writing research papers across a range of disciplines; and secondly, it helps students focus more on language than on content (unlike the approach they might adopt in their other classes where content matters more). To support my observation, let me quote John Swales on the subject of multidisciplinary courses:

> "…it is in our experience (…) that a multidisciplinary class has several advantages over a 'monodisciplinary' one. The former turns attention away from whether the information or content of the text is 'correct' toward questions of rhetoric and language. In this way it encourages rhetorical consciousness-raising. It also leads to interesting group discussions among members who come from very different parts of the university." (Swales and Feak, 2004: 4)

Course aims

The aims of the course can be described as follows:

1. Developing writing skills by analyzing model texts (written by 'expert' writers) and texts written by students (with particular focus on issues involving coherence and cohesion);
2. Expanding academic vocabulary;
3. Consolidating more advanced aspects of English grammar relevant to writing research papers;
4. Consolidation of language functions found in research papers;
5. Comparing various practices and conventions used in writing research papers across a range of disciplines.

Course syllabus and materials

The syllabus (see fig. 1) is largely based on two well-researched academic textbooks, namely *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (Swales and Feak, 2004)

and *English in Today's Research World* (Swales and Feak, 2000). This is supplemented by my own materials (see *Useful links* for some of the more helpful Internet sources) as well as by materials chosen by students,[2] the latter being mostly excerpts from research papers which students are currently reading for their other classes or for the purpose of writing their doctoral dissertations.

The course begins by analyzing the most important considerations related to academic writing in general, such as audience, purpose, organization, style and flow (see Swales and Feak, 2000: 7–43, for a discussion of the above and for related tasks for students).

Early on in the course we also look at effective writing strategies[3] and several relatively well-known[4] editing techniques, which is important because students will spend one third of their classroom time peer-editing each other's written work. Among the techniques we use are:

- repetition of key words
- use of synonyms
- clear reference
- theme and rheme (the "old information, new information" technique)
- bridging between sentences using demonstrative adjectives (e.g., "*This* pattern…")
- use of signposts

Then we move on to analyzing different text patterns, such as the so-called problem-solution texts or general-to-specific texts (or vice versa, specific-to-general texts), which are typical of specific sections of research papers.[5] Other important elements of the course syllabus include writing data commentaries and summaries. Looking at evaluative language and writing critical reviews (or book reviews), though not directly related to the subject matter of the course, is also appreciated by the students and provides a welcome break from the exclusive focus on writing research papers. Finally, we focus on specific sections of the research paper such as *Introduction*, *Methods*, *Results* and *Discussion*. This is an opportunity to go back to some of the language already introduced and practised (notably, describing cause and effect, qualifying statements, highlighting statements, and providing explanations).

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[2] As a result, the materials we use are more relevant to the students' specific disciplines than they would be otherwise.

[3] On the subject of the importance of effective writing strategies and the differences between expert and novice writers in this respect, see, for example, the discussion of research into the writing process in Hyland (2009: 20–26).

[4] One must bear in mind that at the beginning of the course, the students have very little explicit knowledge of issues related to cohesion. For example, they often have a tendency to overuse conjunctions (as they might have previously been taught). Sometimes they need to be shown explicitly that there are other ways of maintaining coherence and cohesion in the text.

[5] For example, the *Introduction* will typically follow the general-to-specific pattern, while the *Conclusion* will be characterized by the specific-to-general pattern. The problem-solution pattern will be found in the *Methods* section of a research paper.

Fig. 1

Topics + approximate number of hours		**Language focus**
1.Academic writing – basic considerations (6 hrs)	- audience - purpose and strategy - organization - style - flow of ideas	- vocabulary shift (informal → formal) - formal grammar style - linking words and phrases - punctuation (semicolons, colons, dashes and commas) - *this* + summary word
2. Writing general-specific texts (8 hrs)	- general statements - short and extended definitions - contrastive and comparative definitions	- the language of defining and naming - the grammar of definitions - articles in academic writing (a/an, the and zero article)
3. Writing problem-solution texts (8 hrs)	- describing processes and procedures - flow of ideas in a process description - causes and effects - introducing the solution	- mid-position adverbs - passive/active voice - participles - *-ing* clauses of result
4. Data commentary (6 hrs)	- structure of data commentary - dealing with graphs - dealing with chronological data	- verbs in indicative and informative summaries - linking *as*-clauses - qualifications and strength of claim - dealing with “problems” - referring to lines on graphs - prepositions of time
5. Writing summaries (6 hrs)	- writing an assignment summary - plagiarism - comparative summaries	- identifying the source in a summary - nominal *that*-clauses - summary reminder phrases - showing similarities and differences
6. Writing critiques (8 hrs)	- book reviews - evaluating an article - evaluative adjectives across the disciplines - reaction papers	- evaluative language - unreal conditionals - beginning the critique - inversions - special verb agreements
7. Constructing a research paper (IMRD pattern) 12 hrs	- short communications (SCs) - overview of the research paper - *methods* sections - *results* sections - *introduction* sections - discussion sections titles - abstracts	- linking phrases in extended methods - hyphens in noun phrases - citation and tense

In sum, the syllabus does not (and in 60 hours it simply could not) cover all elements involved in writing research papers across a range of disciplines; rather, it aims at helping students to understand the features of this particular type of text and raise their awareness of some of the problems they might face while writing up their research.

Classroom practice

Classroom time is more or less equally divided between the following three parts: 1) analyzing model texts (both the relatively simple and short model texts found in the two textbooks mentioned above (Swales and Feak, 2000; Swales and Feak, 2004), as well as texts found and brought to class by students); 2) writing; 3) peer-editing.

Essential to our course is the practice of *peer-editing* and I will therefore discuss it in somewhat greater detail. Once the course is in full swing, classes usually begin with the students collaboratively peer-editing their homework or last week's class assignments. This activity is perceived as particularly useful (and, it seems to me, enjoyable) by the students, and they often request more time to be spent on it before moving on to a new task.

Peer-editing is made much easier by using a *wiki*, which in our case is Google Docs, but any e-learning platform with a well-designed text editor and the possibility of using a wiki would be equally good for this purpose. On Google Docs, all students have equal excess to one another's texts, which they can freely edit. Particularly useful is the possibility of adding comments that might contain reformulations, responses and explanations of specific corrections that have been highlighted by "peer-editors." Each text is usually edited by two or even three different students, thus providing the writer of that text with more feedback. The biggest problem is the daunting amount of work for me (the teacher), as I then have to go over the texts as well as all the comments (and comment on the incorrect ones!).

Another advantage of using a wiki for a writing course like ours is that students no longer write for one boring and not very knowledgeable person (the teacher), but for a very diverse group of interesting individuals. This gives them an opportunity to develop a sense of writing for a wider audience. They also feel more highly motivated than they would be if they were writing one paper for one reader only.[6]

[6] Maintaining a high level of motivation, even with very mature students, is not easy in a writing class as writing is often perceived by students as a tedious, exhausting and solitary activity. Introducing collaborative tasks seems to be an obvious solution.

Feedback and assessment

Since some students may find it discouraging rather than helpful, evaluative feedback can be withheld until the end of the course; *formative* assessment, on the other hand, is copiously provided during the course in the form of comments, reformulations and corrections of students' assignments, as is feedback from classmates (as a result of peer-editing). At the end of the course, students are assessed on the basis of their e-portfolios (i.e., all of the assignments that they have collected in their own folders on Google Docs from the beginning to the end of the course) as well as on a final written assignment.[7] This is a longer piece of writing (1000 words), and students themselves choose the topic as well as the type of text. Some of them bring a section of their research articles or conference papers. Others write a popular science article for the teacher and their classmates, none of whom is an expert. In this final assignment, students are encouraged to collaborate with their classmates, whose comments will help them prepare the final draft.

Conclusion

As I am writing this paper, this year's course is still in progress and the students have not yet submitted their responses to a survey evaluating the course. I am hoping that their responses will help me improve my approach to teaching writing, just as last year's responses did. *English for Research Paper Writing* poses a serious challenge for students and teacher alike, but in my view it is a very rewarding challenge. One of the most enjoyable aspects of teaching such a course is that it gives the teacher considerable freedom and provides a wonderful opportunity for creativity – both while designing and teaching the course.

The course has been evolving from year to year, allowing the flexibility of introducing new materials and modifying the teaching approach. What is most exciting, however, is that the students themselves make a major contribution to the development of the course: *English for Research Paper Writing* is developed for and *together with* the students.[8]

[7] Using a portfolio (or an e-portfolio) is important because it allows me to assess students not only on the final assignment, but also on their improvement during the course, particularly because some of them may have weaker general language skills (not all students are at level C2, or even C1).

[8] To give one example of a student's suggestion that has already been successfully incorporated into my course, let me quote one of last year's course participants, responding to the end-of-term questionnaire: "We should work on particular sections of a research article, for example. Or any other text. During the semester everyone prepares a draft of whatever it is that they are currently working on, and at the end of the semester, everybody will have the entire article ready." Following this suggestion, I now ask my students to bring to class parts of their research articles, grant proposals or any other texts they are working on for some specific purpose other than just "developing their writing skills," which transforms peer-editing into a very "real-life" activity.

Below are some links to websites containing teaching materials that could be useful for teaching EAP writing.

Useful links:

Purdue Online Writing Lab: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/3/.
Pajares F., 2007. *Elements of a Proposal*. http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/proposal.html.
Using English for Academic Purposes. A guide for students in higher education, comprises a large collection of links, including writing materials: http://www.uefap.com/.
British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes: http://www.baleap.org.uk/.
Using the Academic Word List: http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~alzsh3/acvocab/.
The Academic Word List: http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist/.
Academic English Café: http://academicenglishcafe.com/default.aspx.
A Writer's Reference: http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/writersref6e/Player/Pages/Main.aspx.

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